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By Christine Steele

SILVER CITY -- Thirteen workers who were laid off right around Christmas have been hired back by a Silver City company, thanks to federal stimulus money funneled into the local economy.

The town of Silver City was awarded \$600,000 in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding for road and infrastructure improvements. ARRA funding is designed to preserve and create jobs, promote the nation's economic recovery, and assist those most impacted by the recession. The money will be used to make road improvements on Silver Street from the 32nd Street intersection south to Oak Street, and will include new sidewalks, handicapped-access ramps and drive pads, said the city's public works director, Peter Pena.

The area was chosen because of the three schools in the vicinity - Stout Elementary, Silver High School and La Plata Middle School.

"We try to best use the money where it will help out the most amount of people," Pena said. "We didn't have any sidewalks on the east side, and many students in the area walk to school there."

The project has led to keeping 28 people employed, 13 of whom had recently lost their jobs due to the downturn in the economy. In addition to seven city employees and eight employees of Engineers, Inc., the city's partner on the project, 13 laborers, concrete finishers, traffic control workers and asphalt crew members have all been called back to work by Southwest Paving and Concrete since they landed the project, said Southwest's general manager, Joseph Wiseman.

2009 was the slowest year in the company's history since the new owner purchased it in the early 1990s, Wiseman said.

It was forced to lay off three specialty workers in February 2009, because it didn't have the work for them, then an additional 13 right around Christmas, Wiseman said. They were able to call back those 13 workers Feb. 1, due the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act-funded project, he said.

"Right now we have two ARRA projects -- one here, one down in Lordsburg," Wiseman said. "We are also going to supply concrete to two other projects, one in Bayard and one in Hurley. I will probably hire three or four more truck drivers to make sure we can fill all our orders."

Those jobs are expected to start in March and will last three to four months, he said.

Right now, the company has nearly 60 people on the payroll, he said.

The Silver City ARRA-funded project started Feb. 3, Pena said, and its expected completion date is May 3, but that could change depending on weather.

Congressman Harry Teague, D-N.M., was in town Tuesday and met with Pena and Silver City Mayor James Marshall for a short briefing on the Silver Street project and then visited the construction site.

Teague said local improvement projects like the Silver Street one speak to the strength of the ARRA, also known as the federal stimulus bill.

"These funds are being used to invest in our infrastructure for the long term while providing needed jobs to the community," he said. "I applaud Silver City for awarding this contract to a local construction company from southern New Mexico. By utilizing recovery funds to support and grow our local businesses, we can continue to strengthen both southern New Mexico's and our nation's economy."

Pena said the city was very happy to get the funding.

"Any type of infrastructure improvements to the city enhances the community overall," he said. "We feel its going to be a good project not only for the town but for the residents and the people who live that area. And prior to this project starting those guys had been laid off by Southwest and they brought those guys back and it really helped out those people."

Wiseman agreed.

"It just helps out these families. Those guys were laid off without work and now that we were able to get one of these projects, we can get them back to work."

